DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 873 PS 018 283

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TITLE Assessing Community Need for Child Care: Resource Material for Conducting Community Needs Assessments.
INSTITUTION Toronto Univ. (Ontario). Centre for Urban and Community Studies.
SPONS AGENCY Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, Toronto.
PUB DATE Jun 89
NOTE 30p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Characteristics; *Day Care; Early Childhood Education; Foreign Countries; Guidelines; *Needs Assessment; Resource Materials
IDENTIFIERS Ontario

ABSTRACT

These materials have been prepared to help communities identify child care needs and appropriate services or policies for meeting those needs. The materials can be used by community groups to answer two questions: (1) Is there a need for child care in a specific community? (2) What kinds of child care services or policies would be most useful for that community? After a definition of child care needs assessment and a presentation of reasons for assessing such needs, content focuses on 10 steps to be included in a child care needs assessment: (1) establishing a planning committee; (2) defining the purposes of the needs assessment; (3) specifying the objectives; (4) assessing resources; (5) identifying the information which will be needed; (6) choosing research methods; (7) estimating costs; (8) collecting data; (9) analyzing and interpreting data; and (10) reporting results. (RH)

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The Childcare Resource and Research Unit

ASSESSING COMMUNITY NEED FOR CHILD CARE

Resource material for conducting community needs assessments

Martha Friendly

June, 1989

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June, 1989

These materials were developed in connection with a program of pilot projects initiated by the Child Care Branch of the Ministry of Community and Social Services (Ontario) in 1987. A publication entitled Assessing Child Care Needs: Sample Questionnaires was developed as an accompanying piece. Community groups in Ontario as well as in other regions of Canada may find Assessing Community Need for Child Care and Assessing Child Care Needs: Sample Questionnaires useful tools for documenting child care needs and appropriate services and policies to help meet those needs.

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WHAT ARE THESE MATERIALS FOR?

These materials have been developed to be used by community groups to help answer two questions:

1. IS THERE A NEED for child care in a community?

2. WHAT KINDS OF CHILD CARE services or policies would be most useful for that community?

Assessing Community Need for Child Care has been prepared to help communities identify their child care needs and appropriate child care services or policies to meet those needs. The material moves through the steps needed to plan, execute, and report the results of a needs assessment in the most efficient and effective way for your community.

These resources are not intended to help carry out a general assessment of the need for children's services nor to study the feasibility of a new child care program. Nor do they provide a detailed guide to data handling or analysis. Additional resources in these areas are suggested for those who need them.

We have broadly defined child care to include:

* Full-time and part-time group programs (child care centres and nursery schools);
* Private home daycare (child care in the home of a care provider, regulated by the provincial government or unregulated);
* Care in a child's own home (by a care provider, babysitter, or nanny);
* Supplementary programs for parents and other caregivers (parent/child centres, drop-in programs, resource centres, toy libraries);
* Employment policies which support families (parental leaves for childbirth, adoption, or to care for ill children, and flexible work schedules).

WHAT IS A CHILD CARE NEEDS ASSESSMENT? WHY DO IT?

For those who are already aware that many communities in Ontario have unmet child care needs, carrying out a needs assessment may seem superfluous. However, it is not only useful, but necessary, to document the need for child care clearly. Documentation can play several roles:

* It may be useful in securing funding or other assets necessary to create and operate needed child care programs;
* It may help to educate elected officials, community leaders, and families about child care;
* It may be used in advocating for improvements to the child care system generally;
* It may be useful in systematic planning for child care;
* It may be essential for making decisions about the establishment of specific kinds of child care services.

There are many ways in which child care needs assessments can play these roles. For example, the regional council members in a rural community may not have addressed the problem of lack of child care subsidies in their region. A child care needs assessment may not only identify the need but can help focus public attention on the issue.

In another example, union spokespeople in a town's largest plant have become aware that their members have difficulty making child care arrangements for ill children. Management has agreed that absenteeism is a problem. An obvious solution is to establish a child care program to care for ill children. Union and management agree to make an arrangement with a reputable non-profit child care agency to provide in-home care for ill children. Six months after the in-home child care program has been established, only three families from the plant have used it. All three have been management staff. Why?

Although many families in the plant have needed care when their children were ill, the in-home program cost $50 a day, too much for most of the working families at this workplace. A good needs assessment would have identified the need for financial support to the program to make it accessible to working families.

IN SUMMARY

A GOOD CHILD CARE NEEDS ASSESSMENT MAY SERVE SEVERAL PURPOSES. Program development, planning, public education and advocacy are all possibilities.

STEPS IN CONDUCTING A CHILD CARE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Planning the project

Planning a child care needs assessment involves considering some important steps. Even if you plan to carry out a very modest needs assessment, following all the steps will help you make better decisions.

The following steps should be included:

1. Establishing a **planning committee**;
2. Defining the **purposes** of the needs assessment;
3. Specifying the **objectives**;
4. Assessing **resources**;
5. Identifying the **specific information** which will be needed;
6. Choosing **research methods**;
7. Estimating **costs**;
8. **Collecting** data;
9. **Analyzing and interpreting** data;
10. **Reporting** results;

The planning process should involve a thorough consideration of how all of these steps will fit together in your project. Keep in mind, however, that conducting a needs assessment is not a straightforward process and that it may be necessary to adjust your plans once or twice as you go along. For example, an initial plan to hold a large number of discussion groups as well as conducting a mail-out survey may, upon examination of available resources, prove too ambitious.

Steps 1-7 are part of the planning phase of the needs assessment. Steps 8, 9 and 10 make up the information collection, synthesis and presentation phase. It is easier to reassess your plans and make changes before you are involved in actual collection and presentation of data than afterwards.

Reading through these materials and consulting additional resources before you beginning the planning process will help you identify the steps you will have to consider and the choices you will need to make as you proceed with your project.

IN SUMMARY

PLANNING all the steps of a child care needs assessment before you begin will pay off in the end.

1. ESTABLISH A PLANNING COMMITTEE

The purposes, objectives and resources of the needs assessment will influence the composition of this group. There are several things to take into consideration when establishing the planning committee. The committee should include representatives from the following groups:

* organizations and individuals in the community with a common interest in the outcome of the needs assessment;
* organizations and individuals with the knowledge, expertise or access to resources needed to get the needs assessment done;
* individuals willing to spend time and effort planning and executing the needs assessment.

One way to structure a planning committee is to set up two tiers: a small working group to carry out or oversee the needs assessment on an on-going basis and a larger group which functions in an advisory or reference capacity. This may be useful if the community has a number of interest groups who would like to be advised about the planning and execution of the needs assessment but are less interested in involvement on a frequent basis. These interest groups may contribute substantially to the needs assessment by making resources and expertise available.

IN SUMMARY

Establish a PLANNING COMMITTEE which includes:

* a working group which will actually carry out or be responsible for managing the needs assessment;
* groups or individuals who can contribute resources;
* groups or individuals with an interest in the outcome of the needs assessment, if appropriate.

2. DEFINE THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT'S PURPOSES

This section poses some strategic questions which should be answered in the very early stages of planning a needs assessment. As will be seen later on, the GOALS AND PURPOSES of the needs assessment are related to the project's objectives and have implications for the decisions made about data collection, analysis and presentation.

The overall goal

The planning committee should state the overall goal which has motivated the needs assessment project clearly. The project's overall goal should answer the question "why are you doing the needs assessment?" This statement will be much more general than the project's purposes which describe how the results will be used, and the objectives, which are specific questions which help define how the data are collected. For example, the goal statement of a child care needs assessment planning committee could be, "to help improve the child care situation for children and families in our community."

Purposes

How will the needs assessment be used?

As discussed earlier, the results of a needs assessment may be used in a number of ways. Determining how your needs assessment is likely to be used before you begin will help define some aspects of the process.

Be specific when making a list of the ways in which you think the needs assessment will be used. For example, it could be used:

* to identify the kinds of child care services or policies that would best meet the community's needs;
* to support a proposal for capital costs to establish a child care program;
* to demonstrate to a school board the need for space for a child care centre;
* to use as a focus for community forums to raise awareness about child care;

... and so on.

Who will receive the results?

It is important to think about who will receive the results of the child care needs assessment. It may be a good idea to involve some of the groups or individuals who will receive the results in the process of carrying out the needs assessment, although this will not always be wise.

The form in which the results are presented will be determined by the persons or groups to whom the results are to be directed. This suggests that the results of the needs assessment can be presented in several different forms to suit particular audiences. For

example, a potential funder of a child care program may require a detailed report on the needs assessment whereas community members might be best served by a summary of the results.

Who else could be affected by the outcome?

This, again, is a strategic question. In any community, there are likely to be several groups or individuals, holding either common or competing interests, who could be affected by the outcome of a needs assessment. For example, child care service providers, other community groups competing for scarce space resources and parents of young children could all be affected by the results of the needs assessment.

For the planning committee, how to deal with those who could be affected by the results is a strategic decision. In some cases, it may be wise to involve groups with an interest in the outcome in planning or cooperating in the needs assessment. Another way to involve them would be to ask for their support in the needs assessment project. Whatever the approach, it is useful to be aware of the possible impact of the needs assessment.

Who will make decisions based on the outcome?

This is perhaps the most important strategic question. Your needs assessment will probably be directed to whomever will be making decisions about funding, space, sponsorship, or cooperation. If you are clear at the beginning of your project about who the decision-makers are, what decisions they can make, and how your needs assessment can have an impact on the decision-making process, you can design your needs assessment appropriately.

IN SUMMARY

DEFINE YOUR PURPOSES before you begin planning a needs assessment considering:

* What is the overall goal of the project?
* How will it be used?
* Who will receive the results?
* Who else could be affected by the outcome?
* Who will make decisions based on the outcome, and how will the decisions be made?

3. SPECIFY OBJECTIVES

This step is often missed in community research projects. Specifying the objectives of a needs assessment at the beginning of the project can play an important part in planning and organizing the data collection.

Objectives should be derived from the purposes of the needs assesssment. They can help you design the data collection and analysis so that when the project is finished, your questions will have been answered. Objectives can help you plan the data collection to ensure that you are collecting neither too much nor too little information to answer your questions.

Objectives should address:

* What you want to find out, and
* How you will know whether you have found it out.

For example, the planning committee suspects that parents living in one part of your community need child care for infants and decides to carry out a needs assessment to find out how to best meet that need. The principal at the local high school has already indicated a willingness to make vacant space available for a child care centre. An objective of this needs assessment could be:

... To determine the need for infant child care in the Our Town Collegiate Institute community.

Establishment of this objective for the needs assessment would help to define your data collection, probably limiting it to the Our Town Collegiate Institute community. There could be a need for infant care in the larger community but a needs assessment based on this objective would not measure the larger need. However, a second objective related to the child care needs of the larger community could be:

... To determine the need for infant child care in Our Town.

This example illustrates the importance of clarifying the objectives of your project before you begin. Without knowing the specific questions you are trying to answer, you could easily either collect much more information than you need or data which is not adequate to tell you what you want to know.

IN SUMMARY

Develop clear OBJECTIVES from the purposes of the needs assessment early in the project to help determine the limits and forms of your data collection and analysis.

4. ASSESS YOUR RESOURCES

To carry out a needs assessment, you will need adequate resources to provide administration, data collection, data analysis and preparation of results. Resources should be sufficient so that you can ensure that the information you collect, synthesize and present is accurate. Even before deciding what information to collect, it is important to make an ASSESSMENT OF THE RESOURCES you will have available.

Consider available and potential financial resources, in-kind donations and volunteer possibilities. Be realistic and specific about how in-kind and volunteer resources can be used. For example, if a community organization or parents' group volunteers time, it should not be assumed that the volunteers will be able to carry out a statistical analysis of survey data unless you actually know that it is a possibility. Or if an organization offers to pay the costs of producing and mailing questionnaires, clarify how many questionnaires they are willing to produce and mail.

If funding is available to pay for the costs of carrying out your needs assessment, it is still important to determine what resources are available. For example, before deciding to conduct a community-wide mail-out survey, make sure that expertise is available or can be hired to handle, analyze and interpret the questionnaires.

IN SUMMARY

Before deciding what information to collect, make a realistic appraisal of available RESOURCES. Include:

- Funding;
- In-kind donations;
- Volunteer time.

Be specific about the extent and capabilities of available resources, even if sufficient funding is available to carry out the needs assessment.

5. DECIDE WHAT INFORMATION TO COLLECT

Decisions about what INFORMATION TO COLLECT are linked to the purposes and objectives of the needs assessment as well as to the available resources.

For example, your project may have two objectives:

... To determine how many parents working at Our Town Community Hospital need child care compatible with their working hours and,

... To determine what kinds of child care services or policies would be most appropriate to meet these needs.

If your planning group wants to consider offering Our Town Hospital's child care program to residents of the community surrounding the Hospital, a further objective would be:

... To determine the need for child care of parents in the Downtown residential community of Our Town.

In this case, data would be collected from parents in the Downtown community as well as from employees at the Hospital.

The planning committee intends to use the results of this needs assessment in several ways:

* to support a request for capital funds for a child care program (if the needs assessment determines that there is a need);
* to support the case for space for a child care program at the Hospital (if the needs assessment indicates that a child care program at the Hospital would meet the parents' child care needs);
* to raise community awareness about child care programs.

Information about the parents who work at the Hospital and Downtown is needed to answer these questions including:

* Whether they have children (or plan to shortly);
* Ages of children;
* Where they live;
* Transportation to work;
* Patterns and hours of work;
* Current child care arrangements;
* Cost of current child care arrangements;
* Whether they would be interested in a different child care arrangement;
* How much they would be willing or able to pay for a different arrangement;
* What they know about different kinds of child care;
* How interested they would be in each of several child care possibilities.

There are likely to be other pieces of information you will want to collect but this is the kind of list of information you should make, adapting the list to your situation. You will probably want to collect other pieces of information to use as background to put your needs assessment in context. Information about the community, demographic information about the target population, and child care services and policies in the community would be important to include.

IN SUMMARY

The specific INFORMATION TO BE COLLECTED for your needs assessment will vary depending upon the purposes, objectives and resources of your project.

6. SELECT RESEARCH METHODS

The next step is to decide how to collect the information. Your choice of methods will be determined by:

* The information you have decided you need, and
* The resources with which you have to work.

There are two basic ways in which you can secure information for your needs assessment:

1. Analysis of existing information;
2. Collection of new data.

Usually, it is less time and resource-consuming to use existing data but it is unlikely that sufficient information will already exist which clearly answers all of your questions. Most needs assessments will use both existing and new data.

However your information is collected, you will need adequate resources to ensure accuracy, consistency, and adequate data collection methods. It is at this stage in the planning process that you may want to consult someone who has expertise in research design, data collection and data analysis if no one on your planning group has appropriate experience or time. It may be desirable to consult someone with expertise outside your group if for no other reason than to help the committee clarify its capabilities.

Use of existing information

Examples of existing information you will find useful include:

1. program descriptions;
2. demographic data;
3. waiting lists;
4. employment records;
5. service-use data;
6. other needs assessments;
7. child care research and reports.

You will probably find that existing information will have substantial gaps. However, studying it will help you design your collection of new data to fill gaps and to answer specific questions. In addition, existing information is invaluable in setting the context for describing the findings of your needs assessment.

Collection of new data

You will almost certainly be collecting new data for your needs assessment. There are a number of ways in which you can collect new information. You may choose to use more than one approach, perhaps to collect different kinds of information with different groups of respondents. Or you may use several approaches with the same target group, perhaps to refine your information.

For example, you may use a structured telephone interview to collect information from a large sample of parents of preschoolers in your community. If your data indicates that there is interest in a child care centre which provides care in the evenings and weekends, it may be a good idea to hold a series of focused group sessions to discuss specific aspects of an evening and weekend program in more depth.

Whatever methods of data collection are selected, accuracy and consistency of collection, recording and interpretation are extremely important.

The most likely ways you will be collecting new data are:

1. Interviews

There are a number of ways in which interviews can be used to collect data in research including structured interviews, semistructured and unstructured interviews.

A structured interview uses a questionnaire format (see COLLECTING QUESTIONNAIRE DATA, below) and can be conducted face-to-face or over the telephone. A structured interview has certain advantages in comparison to a mail-out or distributed questionnaire including likelihood of a better response rate and flexibility (a question may be repeated if the respondent has not understood). On the other hand, it is more expensive to administer a questionnaire using an interview format and respondents are less anonymous, both potential disadvantages for a community group.

Semistructured or unstructured interviews are a good way to collect information from a relatively small number of people who can provide some expert or informed information. Examples of the kinds of people who could be interviewed in connection with a child care needs assessment are child care service providers, other children's service providers, community leaders, child care advocates, school system personnel, union officials, managers in workplaces, and so on. The planning committee should be clear about the information that will be sought during the interview and specific questions or an outline should be prepared. The same information may or may not be sought from all of the people interviewed as they may have different areas of expertise.

An interviewer training process will help ensure consistency and that recommended interviewing techniques are used. If your planning committee intends to use an interview format to collect data for your needs assessment, please read some of the suggested resources listed at the back of this report for information about interviewer selection, training and techniques.

2. Self-administered Questionnaires

Survey data can be collected in self-administered form. This process involves:

1. distributing questionnaires;
2. collecting them back.

There are many ways in which questionnaires can be distributed. For example, you can ask people to fill them out "on the spot", you can distribute and collect them back through the mail, ask other organizations to send them out with a regular mailing, or use other established distribution routes. Often groups in the community with an interest in your project (who may be part of the planning committee) will be able to help in the distribution of questionnaires.

Remember that an adequate response rate can be critical to how accurately your information reflects your target group and that some methods of questionnaire distribution and collection are more likely than others to have high response rates. Together with your assessment of resources, consideration of response rate should determine the ways in which you chose to ask respondents to complete the questionnaires.

There are a number of simple ways in which you can increase response rates:

* Including a self-addressed envelope for return of questionnaires;
* Keeping track of returned questionnaires and following-up non-returns;
* Having an easy and clear way for completed questionnaires to be returned;
* Using meetings attended by your target population (Home and School, for example) to distribute questionnaires;
* Collecting completed questionnaires in person, in a workplace or neighbourhood, for example.

3. Group techniques

Group techniques for collecting information for a child care needs assessment may be useful in a number of ways including:

1. collection of information to refine questionnaire data;
2. clearly identifying a potential user group for your child care project;

Structured group techniques can be used to amass qualitative information which is useful to test or expand upon quantitative data collected in other ways.

Group techniques can be used in other ways, some less clearly related to the collection of data. For example, some group techniques can be used to:

* provide public education to parents about possible solutions to child care needs;
* identify potential child care users to work with the planning committee on the project;
* demonstrate public support for the project.

Group techniques include small group events like focused groups. For the purpose of refining information collected from more quantitative sources (a questionnaire administered over the telephone, for example), focused groups may be extremely useful. For example, your planning committee is assessing the need for child care for families in a farming area which includes a town with a population of 5,000. Your questionnaire data collected by mail-out survey identifies the need for a variety of kinds of child care including needs for seasonal, extended hours care in harvest season, care at other times of the year for farming parents, child care for families working in town, and early childhood education opportunities for toddlers and preschoolers. Parents responding to the questionnaire have indicated that they are eager to have access to various child care services.

However, it may be difficult to ascertain the most appropriate array of child care services on the basis of this questionnaire data. Discussion with a number of focused groups selected to represent the spectrum of potential child care users in the community could provide direction for the planning committee about priorities.

Focused groups should be composed of people whose characteristics reflect your target groups, for example, shiftworkers, part-time workers, farmers, at-home parents, and so on. Groups seem to work best with seven to ten participants and should meet in a relaxed, easily accessible location (a private home, for example). Participants may be paid for their time and transportation and child care costs may be paid. A discussion leader with some expertise in working with groups as well as knowledge of child care should lead and direct the discussion. Discussion may be recorded or thorough notes taken by a non-participant.

Larger group events like public meetings, public hearings or community forums are a useful way to build community support for your project or to provide public education, including to the potential parent-user group. For example, parents may not be informed about solutions to the problem of care for ill children and will not be able to choose among child care alternatives about which they have no information. A public meeting to present information about options could precede mail-out of a questionnaire.

Ethics in data collection

An important question which should be considered by any group which is planning to collect information is how to ensure anonymity, confidentiality and that participants have been informed about the terms of their participation. Established research practice and the legal requirements of some institutions (like universities and some governments) require that these issues be addressed and appropriate provisions made.

1. Consent.

Your committee may want to draw up a form upon which participants can indicate that they have been informed about the purpose and process of the project and that they have agreed that the information they provide will be used as part of the project's data under specified terms.

2. Anonymity.

It is a good practice to keep the names of participants in your project separate from the information they are providing. For example, if you use a structured

interview with a sample of child care service providers, their responses should be identified by a code or number, not their name (although you may need to keep a list of their names together with the codes in a separate place). If you wish to use self-administered questionnaire forms to solicit the names of parents to sit on a potential child care committee, or obtain a list of parents' names who would like a copy of your needs assessment report, include a return sheet which can be separated from the completed questionnaire.

It may not be possible for the responses of some participants to be anonymous. For example, if you interview the Mayor of your town, she is likely to be clearly identifiable.

3. Confidentiality.

Information about individual participants in your project should be held in confidence by the researchers and should not be shared with other individuals or groups for any reason.

IN SUMMARY

The planning committee should select its methods of selecting information based on the PURPOSES and OBJECTIVES established for the needs assessment and the RESOURCES which are available. Usually a combination of existing information and new data will be most useful and often, several ways of collecting the information will be used. Issues of CONFIDENTIALITY and ANONYMITY must be considered. All of these steps have cost, time and expertise implications. It is important that all methods of data collection are carried out accurately and with consistency.

For more detailed information, please look into some of the resource materials listed at the back of the report.

7. ESTIMATE COSTS

Once you have made preliminary decisions about how you will collect, analyze, and present your information, the planning group can consider the costs of the needs assessment. After estimating the costs of the methods you have chosen and assessed available resources, it may be necessary to reconsider your plans and opt for less expensive methods.

Kinds of costs to consider

Coordination costs
Staff to coordinate needs assessment
Secretarial and office costs
Telephone

Costs of using existing information
Research costs

Interview costs
Cost of setting-up, carrying-out and writing-up interviews
Transportion or telephone costs for interviews

Questionnaire costs
Cost to develop or adapt questionnaires
Cost of sampling
Cost of printing questionnaires
Cost of administering questionnaires
Cost of developing and carrying out coding
Cost of setting-up and carrying-out data entry
Cost of data analysis

Costs of group techniques
Advertising for large-group event
Meeting space
Transportation/child care costs for focus groups
Refreshments
Cost to develop and produce written materials
Cost for focus group facilitation

Costs of presenting results
Staff costs to write report(s)
Layout/printing costs of report
Cost of distributing report

This rather exhaustive list of items may include things which are not relevant to your group. It is intended to be used only to illustrate the parts of a needs assessment which should be included in a basic list of potential costs for your project.

You may be able to have some things donated or carried out by members of the planning committee or by volunteers. Be clear about what donations and volunteer time will cover.

Working with a consultant

Some needs assessments may require the assistance of a consultant with expertise in specified areas. If your project may be HIRING A CONSULTANT, there are some important things to consider:

1. Make sure that the consultant understands child care. Experience in research on child care is ideal but it may be difficult to find a consultant with this experience. Look at final reports from previous projects the consultant has carried out and ask for references from previous employers.

2. The consultant needs to have enough expertise about the aspects of the needs assessment for which he/she will be responsible to get the job done. For example, if a complicated sampling design is necessary, make sure that the consultant has expertise in sampling or access to someone who does.

3. Your group should have a clear idea of what work the consultant will be carrying out. Discussion between your group and the consultant should clarify the details very early in the project.

4. The consultant should be someone with whom you can communicate and who can communicate well to you about areas where you have less expertise. For example, the consultant should be able to explain clearly to your planning committee the findings of a survey and its implications for your needs assessment.

5. Draw up an agreement with the consultant which includes:

* the work to be conducted;
* description of outcomes (reports, summaries, etc.);
* lines of authority and reporting mechanisms;
* time-frame;
* payment (amount and schedule).

6. Remember that it is your needs assessment, not the consultant's. Within the terms of your agreement, your planning committee should retain authority to make decisions. The consultant, of course, will insist upon reporting the results of the research objectively.

Consultants may charge on a per-diem basis, an hourly basis, or for the whole job and may or may not charge you separately for certain costs. You may want to get more than one "bid" for your project and compare the budgets and content of the proposals.

To get the names of people who can carry out this kind of work, you could ask at the Early Childhood Education department of your local community college, universities, the Area Office of the Ministry of Community and Social Services, a local Children's Services Advisory Group and child care advocacy organizations.

There are many ways in which you can work with a consultant. For example, your planning committee could hire a consultant to carry out the entire needs assessment, from involvement with the planning committee in clarifying purposes and objectives through writing and presenting a final report. Or you could use a combination of donated resources and volunteer time to carry out almost all steps of the needs assessment and hire a consultant only to design and execute the analysis of survey data.

IN SUMMARY

ESTIMATING THE COST of a needs assessment includes:

* consideration of preliminary decisions made about collection of information;
* assessment of what can be carried out with donated and volunteer resources and what will require additional hired expertise.

If your estimated costs are too high, you may have to go back to rethink some of the data collection decisions you have made.

8. USING QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

It is likely that your needs assessment will require some data collected using a questionnaire. Using a questionnaire may be very complicated or it may be simple. The amount of time and resources a questionnaire consumes is related to the questions you need to answer and to the method you chose to collect the questionnaire data. Your plans may need to be adjusted according to the resources you have available.

If you plan to collect questionnaire data, it is important to keep in mind not only the time, financial resources, and expertise needed to collect the data but the time, financial resources, and expertise which will be necessary to code, analyze, verify and interpret the data. Think through all of the steps before you begin so that the handling of the data will be manageable and you will have anticipated what needs to be done.

These materials do not include information about developing questionnaires. A companion piece, Assessing Child Care Needs: Sample Questionnaires, has been developed to assist groups who are conducting child care needs assessments. If your group intends to develop its own questionnaires, please read some of the additional resource materials listed.

In order to use questionnaire data in your child care needs assessment, you will have to:

1. Choose the group to receive questionnaires;
2. Decide how to administer the questionnaires;
3. Develop or adapt the questionnaires;
4. Administer the questionnaires;
5. Code and enter or tabulate the data;
6. Analyze the data;
7. Interpret the data.

Choosing the group

It is important that the group to whom you administer questionnaires reflects or represents the group to whom child care services would be directed. It is also important that the group is big enough so that the data collected can answer your questions yet not so big that you are collecting data you don't need and can't handle. In order to be confident that your data reflects your target group sufficiently well, you will need to consider ways to ensure that the response rate (or rate of completed questionnaires) is adequate. The method selected to collect your questionnaire data as well as how the method is implemented will have an impact on the response rate.

A population is the whole group about whom you want to know something. If you have a way of reaching all the members, and if you expect that you will be able to get a reasonable rate of completed questionnaires, you may want to try to administer a questionnaire to every person in your target group. A good example of this kind of situation would be a workplace. If your objective is..."to find out whether there is a need for a child care program for employees at Our Town Community Hospital", you may be

able to send a questionnaire to every employee at the hospital in his/her pay envelope and develop a method for collecting completed questionnaires which is designed to maximize the response rate. In this case, employees with young children would be your target population.

Another good example of a situation in which you could survey a whole population would be a school catchment area in which you could send a questionnaire to every family with children in school to gather information on the need for a school-age child care program.

If your response rate is adequate, collecting questionnaire data from everyone in your target population means that you can be sure that your data accurately represents the views of that whole group.

In many situations, however, you will need to choose a sample of the whole group. You will need to sample when it is too expensive or time-consuming to interview or send a questionnaire to everyone in the whole group. For example, if you want to find out about the need for infant care among the 50,000 residents of Our Town, it is probably impractical to interview all families with infants in the community.

There are two important aspects to choosing a good sample:

* How to choose respondents;
* How many to choose.

If you are choosing a sample so that you can make some statements about a larger population, how you chose respondents and the size of the sample you choose will affect the credibility and accuracy of your results. Established statistical procedures will allow you to calculate an appropriate sample size and report your results with appropriate levels of statistical confidence.

In order to decide whom you will approach to answer your questionnaire, go back to your purposes and objectives to consider what you want to accomplish. For example, if your objective is to find out about the need for infant care in Our Town, you will want to be able to speak with accuracy about the child care needs of the whole town. In order to generalize from your sample to the whole town, you would have to select your sample in a way which is relatively free from bias, using a representative sample.

If, on the other hand, your objective is to find out if there is enough need for infant child care to establish a child care centre at Our Town Collegiate Institute, whether or not your sample is representative of the whole town is not particularly important. In this case, you could visit community meetings and ask to hand out questionnaires, ask other infant care centres to send questionnaires out to parents on their waiting lists, or hold your own community meeting and ask people to fill out questionnaires.

The trick to sampling is deciding who to leave in and who to leave out of the sample. If you think that your needs assessment process will include sampling, it would be useful to consult someone with expertise in this area or to study some further resources which discuss sampling in more detail.

Choosing the method of administration

In Section 6, several methods of collecting questionnaire data (telephone and face-to-face interviews and self-administration) were discussed. The important points to consider when choosing a method for collecting questionnaire data are:

1. the resources available;
2. the specific information you want to collect;
3. the logistic possibilities for establishing contact with respondents that will obtain completed questionnaires;
4. the relative likelihood of high response rates through various methods.

Developing (or adapting) the questionnaire

A set of questionnaires, Assessing Child Care Needs: Sample Questionnaires, which can be used as part of most kinds of child care needs assessments in Ontario have been developed to accompany these materials. The questionnaires may be used as they are or adapted to suit your own purposes. If you are considering adapting the questionnaires, inquire at the local Area Office of the Ministry of Community and Social Services (Ontario) about whether needs assessment projects similar to yours have adapted these questionnaires. It might be useful for you to consult other groups about how adaptations have worked.

If you make small changes to the accompanying questionnaires so that they reflect your specific situation, try out your questions on a few people to make sure the wording is clear and unambiguous. If you find it necessary to develop a new questionnaire, it would be useful to look at child care questionnaires which have been used successfully in needs assessments and read further resource materials which discuss questionnaire development in detail.

Keeping track of questionnaire data

While you are planning the administration of your questionnaires is a good time to consider how you will organize the data physically when it is returned and a system for keeping track of it. For example, you will need several checklists so that you will know which information is complete, which questionnaires have been returned, which have been coded, and so on.

IN SUMMARY

USING QUESTIONNAIRE DATA involves:

- choosing the group from whom you will collect data;
- choosing the method of administration;
- developing or adapting the questionnaire.

All three aspects are important to ensure that your data is useful.

9. ANALYZING THE DATA

This section is intended to provide a brief overview of the steps involved in analyzing the information you have collected. Detailed information about how to carry out the analysis step of your needs assessment should be derived from additional resources or expert consultation.

Analyzing your data has several components:

1. Planning the analysis
2. Verifying and coding data
3. Tabulating results
4. Interpreting results

Like other steps of your needs assessment, the components of data analysis should be carried out with adequate resources and expertise to ensure that the results will be accurate.

Planning the analysis

The objectives you set for your needs assessment are of key importance in planning your data analysis. For example, if the objective of the needs assessment is ... "to determine whether there is a need for a child care centre at Our Town Collegiate Institute", extracting that information from the data you have collected is relatively simple. If the needs assessment's objective is ... "to determine the needs for infant child care in Our Town", the analysis of the data will be more complicated. The objectives are the questions which the needs assessment intends to answer. They therefore structure the analysis of data and the presentation of results.

Planning the analysis will be influenced by your available resources. For example, it is possible that the planning committee does not have access to a computer, to expertise to analyze the data using a computer nor the resources to hire a consultant. If this is so, you may have to tally your questionnaire results by hand.

Plans for your analysis of data should include:

1. questions to be answered (the objectives);
2. what pieces of information (questionnaire, interview, group discussion, demographic data, etc.) will be used to answer each question;
3. how each piece of information will be produced.

Coding questionnaire data

The process of coding questionnaire data involves quantifying, or turning into numerical form, all of the information on each "case". The sample questionnaires developed to accompany these materials, Assessing Child Care Needs: Sample Questionnaires, are pre-coded. Almost all of the questions are close-ended questions; that is, the responses to each question are already listed for the respondent to choose and check off. Pre-coded questionnaires can be tabulated right from the questionnaire.

If you develop your own questionnaires, consider setting them up in such a way that a completed questionnaire will already have most of the information ready for coding in numerical form on the questionnaire. It will, of course, not always be possible to use all close-ended, pre-coded questions. However, your coding job will be much easier if you use this kind of question whenever possible. If you will be developing your own coding procedures, you may want to read some of the further resources suggested.

You should identify each of the returned questionnaires with a unique identifying number. You may want to set up a numbering system which allows you to group questionnaires by certain characteristics. For example, if you distributed questionnaires through five elementary schools and you want to be able to easily identify where they were distributed, each school's questionnaires could begin with a different digit 1 through 5. Each of the five sets of questionnaires could then have as a set of sequential numbers using 001, 002, 003, and so on.

Go over through all of your questionnaires to make sure that the responses are marked clearly before you begin tabulating the responses. You may find places where there is no answer marked, no clear answer, or several answers where only one is asked for. For example, to questions about family income, there will always be some respondents who choose not to answer, even if assured of anonymity. These responses should just be considered to be "missing" and reported in that way.

Tabulating questionnaire results

You are most likely to be tabulating your data using a computer. Your group may have resources to carry out the data entry out itself or to hire and supervise someone to do it. Another possibility you may want to consider is hiring the services of a company which specializes in data entry.

Techniques for systematizing and simplifying data entry are available using various computer software packages. In order to use these methods, you will need someone with expertise who can tailor the data entry procedure to your specific questionnaire.

If your group does not have access to a computer and expertise to use it, you may have to tabulate your data by hand. In this case, planning and accuracy are just as important. Hand tabulation is likely to be quite time-consuming so you should make sure that adequate time resources are available and that the analysis is relatively simple.

Whatever method of data tabulation is chosen, accuracy and consistency are important in ensuring that the data represents your community's child care needs accurately.

Statistical analysis

Analysis of quantitative data should be interpreted using proper statistical procedures. The analysis of your quantitative data should produce summaries of information which are related to the questions you are trying to answer. For example, if an objective of your needs assessment is ..."to determine how many children whose parents work at Our Town Community Hospital require child care", the analysis of your data should answer that question numerically.

In some circumstances when reporting questionnaire data, statements will be strengthened if the results are statistically significant. A test of significance is a statistical way of interpreting the strength of findings and, should be carried out as part of the analysis of certain kinds of data. Appropriate expertise will be required to ensure that your data analysis is adequate.

Interpreting the results

Interpreting the results of the needs assessment should take into consideration all of the information you have collected including background statistics, interview results, questionnaire findings, and so on. In general, it is most useful for several people, likely the planning committee to have an opportunity to participate in interpretation of the results so that a variety of perspectives are considered.

IN SUMMARY

ANALYZING THE DATA involves several components:

* Planning the analysis;
* Coding the data;
* Tabulating results;
* Statistical analysis;
* Interpreting results.

10. REPORTING THE RESULTS

The purpose of writing up the results of your needs assessment is to communicate about what you found. You will want to think about the best way of communicating the information to each target group. This may involve producing several kinds of written material and include several kinds of presentations.

Writing the report

To organize the basic report of the results of your needs assessment, go back to some of the decisions made earlier which defined how the needs assessment has been carried out. The PURPOSES and OBJECTIVES of the needs assessment can organize how the information is presented.

The report should include the following kinds of information:

1. Background

   Information on the committee conducting the needs assessment
   Description of the community
   Description of the child care situation
   Policy context
   Key players
   What motivated the needs assessment

2. Methodology

   Purposes
   Objectives
   What information was collected and how
   How data were analyzed

3. Findings

   Numerical and descriptive summaries of quantitative data
   Descriptive summaries of non-quantitative data

4. Discussion/interpretation

   What the findings mean in terms of your objectives

5. Recommendations

   Concrete suggestions for action
   To whom each recommendation is directed

Questionnaires, a list of interviewees and key informants, members of the planning committee, and references can be appended to the report for additional clarification. It is also useful to add a brief (one-page) summary which includes a short description of the needs assessment and the key findings and recommendations.

The planning committee should draw up a list of people to whom a copy of the report should be sent. The list should include the people or groups to whom the needs assessment is directed: funders, administrators, elected officials.

Usually, participants in the needs assessment, interviewees, participants in group discussions, and people who were particularly helpful would receive a copy of the final report. You may want to consider ways of alerting people who filled out questionnaires that a report has been released. For example, if a school sent out questionnaires to parents in the school, the school could send a notice out to parents to tell them that some copies of the report are available in the school office.

You may find it useful to distribute or publicize your basic report in a number of ways. You may, for example, want to hold a public meeting to discuss the report, issue a press release on the findings, or write up short synopses of your study for newsletters.

IN SUMMARY

The purpose of REPORTING THE RESULTS of the needs assessment project is to communicate what you found and what it means. Reporting the results may include several ways of distributing and publicizing your findings including written pieces and public presentations.

FURTHER RESOURCES

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This project was funded by the
Child Care Branch of the
Ministry of Community and Social Services